'Designer babies': the ultimate privileged elite?

[Heather Long](http://www.theguardian.com/profile/heather-long) – The Guardian.com 9 July 2013

A US baby born via IVF and genetically screened could open the door to wealthy parents selecting for ideal traits in their kids

** David Levy and Marybeth Scheidts with their baby Connor Levy, the first IVF baby to be screened using a procedure that can read every letter of the human genome. PR**

When the world looks back at how the "designer babies" trend began, they will see an innocent start. [A Philadelphia couple](http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2013/jul/07/ivf-baby-born-genetic-screening?google_editors_picks=true) who had gone through the physical and emotional marathon of trying to have a child turned to intra-uterine insemination and ultimately IVF. Like any rational people, they wanted to do everything to increase their chances that IVF would work. In this case, they sent the embryos to an Oxford lab, which ran a kind of[minimal DNA test](http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2013/jul/07/ivf-baby-born-genetic-screening?google_editors_picks=true) to see which embryos would be most likely to take.

It's hard to deny this [Philadelphia](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/philadelphia) couple the chance to be parents. David Levy and Marybeth Scheidts look very wholesome in their family photo holding their son Connor, born in May 2013. They clearly weren't trying to select the embryo with their preferred hair or eye color or other physical or mental traits. In fact, they didn't even have a full DNA analysis done, only a scan of the chromosomes, the structures that hold genes. This isn't Brave New World-esque test tube babies. It's a traditional family – with the best of modern medicine.

But that's just it, not every couple will be like that.

Dagan Wells, the fertility specialist at Oxford University, told the Guardian:

*IVF is still expensive and uncomfortable with no guarantee of a baby at the end. I can't imagine many people wanting to go through the strains of*[*IVF*](http://www.theguardian.com/society/ivf)*for something trivial.*

Wells has an entirely too charitable view of humanity. Perhaps he missed the news about the mother who loved tanning so much that she did it [until she turned into a weird chestnut color](http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/03/04/17183166-tan-mom-patricia-krentcil-looking-for-her-place-in-the-sun?lite) and tried to bring her daughter along as well. Or the people who not only get plastic surgery for themselves, but also[for their pets](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2357023/A-facelift-Fido-Botox-Buster-How-pet-owners-spending-10-000-cosmetic-surgery-DOGS.html).

People do bizarre things to obtain a certain look, even if the most of us would say it's gross.

I can't imagine it will be long before some parents do ask the lab to give them a longer rundown of the genetic possibilities of each embryo. It will likely be a progression from just wanting a child, to wanting one less likely to get certain diseases, to wanting one more likely to have traits associated with being taller or more artistic or athletic. From there, it's not to hard to imagine something akin to the Subway sandwich line where you select different traits a la carte. And that's before anyone talks about the endless possibilities of [combing DNA from more than two people](http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2013/jun/28/uk-government-ivf-dna-three-people).

There's a case to be made that genetic selection is just the next step in evolution. Who hasn't wanted to be a little bit taller or faster or smarter at some point? Who wouldn't want to give their child every advantage possible in an increasingly competitive world? And frankly, in the US, we've already done this kind of "designer baby" breeding for many crops and animals raised to be consumed. We have bred them and genetically modified them to be what we want (or, better said, what we think we want). Is it really that different to do the same for humans?

For me, the answer is still yes, it is different for humans. Beyond the moral questions of "playing God", there are the practical ones. If this procedure takes off, it will only further exacerbate our world of haves and have nots. IVF is expensive. Many insurance providers in the US [don't cover it](http://www.resolve.org/family-building-options/insurance_coverage/the-debate-marches-on-should-infertility-coverage-be-considered-an-essential-health-benefit.html). Even if the cost of this extra genetic screening comes down, the overall procedure is probably going to be out of reach for many Americans, let alone other countries around the world.

Imagine a scenario at a future Olympics: is it legitimate to have a genetically designed person competing against those who are not? At the moment, it's a bit of luck who has the right body for certain sports. But in the future, those traits could be selected for and groomed from the womb.

And that's to say nothing of other traits people in wealthy families might select for, creating a kind of demi-god race that will be taller, healthier, probably better-looking by conventional standards and more likely to have certain mental smarts. If the rest of the world is struggling to catch up now, imagine how much further behind they will be. A good college education will be an afterthought.

I have known a number of people who have undergone IVF, often multiple times, and I wouldn't want to deny them a better chance at having it work out the first time around. But I have also known couples who couldn't afford IVF. They ended up going the adoption route. They didn't get to select their child, especially those who adopted via the government-run foster care system. They felt fortunate even to be able to adopt one, regardless of the emotional or physical issues the child had or the outward characteristics.

Of course, it's worth celebrating the birth of a child to two Philadelphia parents who might not otherwise have had a kid. But if we think the gap between the haves and have-nots is large now, just wait until this technology is used to pre-select characteristics for success